CLAIMS

Having thus described our invention, what we claim as new and desire to secure by Letters Patent is as follows:

Claim 1. A method of playing a game using a symbol matrix formed by a plurality of rows intersecting with a plurality of columns, with the plurality of rows and columns defining a plurality of pay lines and including a plurality of symbols, comprising:

a)   a player making a wager to play the game;

b)   randomly rearranging the plurality of symbols;

c)   displaying the rearranged symbols in the symbol matrix, including any wildcard symbols ("original wildcards");

d)   expanding original wildcard symbols, if displayed, in vertical, horizontal, and/or diagonal directions into adjacent symbols positions in the symbol matrix ("expanded wildcards").

e)   awarding the player based on at least one of the following winning combinations of symbols:

1)   Pre-determined combinations of symbols appearing contiguously on a pay line ("line pays"), including line pays using original

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and/or expanded wildcards.

2) Pre-determined combinations of symbols appearing anywhere on a pay line ("line scatter pays") or in the symbol matrix ("reel scatter pays"), including line and/or reel scatter pays using original and/or expanded wildcards.

Claim 2. A method of claim 1 in which the plurality of symbols includes at least one or more wildcard symbols.

Claim 3. A method of claim 1 in which the plurality of symbols includes at least one or more wildcard symbols that may expand in any direction.

Claim 4. A method of claim 1 in which the plurality of symbols includes at least one or more wildcard symbols that may expand in any number of directions.

Claim 5. A method of claim 1(d) in which a player determines the direction(s) a wildcard may expand in the symbol matrix.

Claim 6. A method of claim 1(d) in which a player may

determine the direction(s) a wildcard may expand in the
symbol matrix, upon satisfying at least one of the
following requirements:

a) selecting at least a pre-determined amount of pay
lines;

b) wagering at least a pre-determined amount per pay
line;

c) wagering at least a pre-determined amount on the
game;

d) wagering an additional amount for each additional
direction;

e) providing requested input to the game; or

f) with no pre-determined wager requirement, no
additional cost, and with no required input.

Claim 7. A method of claim 1(d) in which the game
determines the direction(s) a wildcard may expand in the
symbol matrix.

Claim 8. A method of claim 1(d) in which the game
determines the direction(s) a wildcard may expand in the
symbol matrix, according to at least one of the following
methods:

a) randomly assigning the direction(s) from a pre-

determined range of directions;

b) following a pre-determined schedule specifying the direction(s); and

c) using one or more fixed directions.

Claim 9. A method of claim 1(d) in which a player determines the number of directions a wildcard symbol may expand in the symbol matrix.

Claim 10. A method of claim 1(d) in which a player may determine the number of directions a wildcard symbol may expand in the symbol matrix, upon satisfying at least one of the following requirements:

a) selecting at least a pre-determined amount of pay lines;

b) wagering at least a pre-determined amount per pay line;

c) wagering at least a pre-determined amount on the game;

d) wagering an additional amount for each additional direction;

e) providing input to the game, such as answering a question or performing a requested task, or

f) with no pre-determined wager requirement, no

additional cost, and with no required input.

Claim 11. A method of claim 1(d) in which the game determines the number of directions a wildcard symbol may expand in the symbol matrix.

Claim 12. A method of claim 1(d) in which the game determines the number of directions a wildcard may expand in the symbol matrix, according to at least one of the following methods:

a) randomly assigning a number of directions from a pre-determined range of numbers;

b) following a pre-determined schedule specifying the number of directions; or

c) using a fixed number of directions.

Claim 13. A method of claim 1(d) in which a first wildcard symbol may only expand upwards and second wildcard symbol may only expand downwards.

Claim 14. A method of claim 1(d) in which a first wildcard symbol may only expand upwards and second wildcard symbol may only expand downwards, with no pre-determined wager requirement, no additional cost to the player, and

with no required input from the player.

Claim 15. A method of claim 1(e) in which a wildcard symbol substitutes for any other symbol to form a winning symbol combination, including line, line scatter, or reel scatter pay, in accordance with a pay schedule.

Claim 16. A method of claim 1(e) in which a wildcard symbol substitutes for a limited subset of other symbols to form a winning symbol combination, including line, line scatter, or reel scatter pays, in accordance with a pay schedule.

Claim 17. A method of claim 1(e) in which a wildcard symbol substitutes for a limited subset of other symbols to form line pays only, in accordance with a pay schedule.

Claim 18. A method of claim 1(e) in which a wildcard symbol substitutes for a limited subset of other symbols to form line scatter pays only, in accordance with a pay schedule.

Claim 19. A method of claim 1(e) in which a wildcard symbol substitutes for a limited subset of other symbols to

form reel scatter pays only, in accordance with a pay schedule.

Claim 20. A method of claim 1(e) in which a wildcard symbol, substituting for any other symbol to form a winning symbol combination, enhances the value of the award specified in the pay schedule.

Claim 21. A method of claim 1(e) in which a wildcard symbol, substituting for any other symbol to form a winning symbol combination, enhances the value of the award specified in the pay schedule, according to at least one of the following methods:

    a) increases the award value by a fixed amount;

    b) increases the award value by a random amount from within a pre-determined range of amounts;

    c) increases the award by the amount specified on the face of the wildcard symbol;

    d) multiplies the award value by a fixed amount;

    e) multiplies the award value by a random amount from within a pre-determined range of multiplier values; or

    f) multiplies the award by the amount specified on the face of the wildcard symbol;

Claim 22. A method of claim 1(d) in which multiple wildcard symbols may expand into the same symbol position in the symbol matrix.

Claim 23. A method of claim 1(e) in which multiple wildcard symbols expanding into the same symbol position ("overlapped symbol position") in the symbol matrix result in an award, free spins, prize, bonus game or other bonus feature.

Claim 24. A method of claim 1(e) in which multiple wildcard symbols expanding into the same symbol position ("overlapped symbol position") in the symbol matrix result in at least one of the following effects:

   a)   enhancement of any for any winning combination

   b)   enhancement of awards for winning combinations using the overlapped symbol position;

   c)   issuance of a fixed award for each overlapped symbol position;

   d)   issuance of a random award, from within a pre-determined range of awards, for each overlapped symbol position;

   e)   issuance one or more free spins for each overlapped symbol position;

f) issuance of a prize for each overlapped symbol position;

g) triggering a bonus game for each overlapped symbol position;

h) triggering a bonus game with bonus award values determined by the number of overlapped symbol positions.

Claim 25. A method of claim 1(e) in which each wildcard symbol uses different rules for expansion into adjacent symbol positions, substitution for other symbols, and/or award enhancement of winning symbol combinations.

Claim 26. A method of claim 1(e) in which awards for winning symbol combinations may be issued before and/or after expansion of wildcard symbols into adjacent symbol positions in the symbol matrix.

Claim 27. A method of playing a game using a symbol matrix formed by a plurality of rows intersecting with a plurality of columns, with the plurality of rows and columns defining a plurality of pay lines and including a plurality of symbols, comprising:

a) making a wager to play the game;

b) randomly rearranging the plurality of symbols;

c) displaying the rearranged symbols in the symbol matrix, including at least one expanding wildcard symbol;

d) expanding the at least one expanding wildcard symbol in at least one of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal directions into a plurality of wildcard symbols displayed in adjacent symbol positions in the symbol matrix;

e) awarding the player based on at least one of the following winning combinations of symbols:

    (1) first pre-determined combinations of the plurality of symbols appearing contiguously on a pay line including the at least one expanding wildcard symbol, or at least one of the plurality of wildcard symbols, or any combination thereof;

    (2) second pre-determined combinations of the plurality of symbols appearing anywhere on at least one of the pay lines, or in the symbol matrix using the at least one expanding wildcard symbol, or at least one of the plurality of wildcard symbols, or any combination thereof.

Claim 28. A method of playing a game using a symbol matrix formed by a plurality of rows intersecting with a plurality of columns, with the plurality of rows and columns defining a plurality of pay lines and including a plurality of symbols, comprising at least one of the sequential, non-sequential and sequence independent steps of:

   a) making a wager to play the game;

   b) randomly rearranging the plurality of symbols;

   c) displaying the rearranged symbols in the symbol matrix, including at least one expanding wildcard symbol;

   d) expanding the at least one expanding wildcard symbol in at least one of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal directions into a plurality of predetermined or random symbols displayed in adjacent symbol positions in the symbol matrix;

   e) awarding the player based on at least one of the following winning combinations of symbols:

      (1) first pre-determined combinations of the plurality of symbols appearing contiguously on a pay line including the at least one expanding wildcard symbol, or

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at least one of the plurality of predetermined or random symbols, or any combination thereof;

(2) second pre-determined combinations of the plurality of symbols appearing anywhere on at least one of the pay lines, or in the symbol matrix using the at least one expanding wildcard symbol, or at least one of the plurality of predetermined or random symbols, or any combination thereof.